DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 367 099 EC 302 801

AUTHOR Sparks, Elizabeth E.

TITLE A Paradigm Shift from Giftedness-as-Potential to Giftedness-as-Possibility.

PUB DATE Sep 93

NOTE 34p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Society for the Advancement of Gifted Education (4th, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, September 23-24, 1993).

PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS Definitions; *Educational Philosophy; Elementary Secondary Education; *Gifted; *Hermeneutics; *Individual Development; Language Arts; *Student Development

ABSTRACT

This hermeneutic, or interpretive, inquiry questions the historical cultural roots of the assumption that giftedness is defined in terms of essential properties that identify a select few children. It proposes, instead, a gifted way of life that is constituted by possibilities and is open to all persons. The hermeneutic paradigm of textual interpretation (in which the whole must be understood in terms of the parts and vice versa) is applied to a conversation with a 12-year-old gifted student interacting with an advanced text. Four possibilities for ontological giftedness are discussed: imagination, confusion, ignorance, and fusion of horizons. The familiar concepts of giftedness as high potential and gifted children as a civilization's treasure are challenged. The language arts are seen as a subject area in which any child can lose himself and find himself as a gifted human being. (Contains 30 references.) (DB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED 367 099

A PARADIGM SHIFT FROM GIFTEDNESS-AS-POTENTIAL TO GIFTEDNESS-AS-POSSIBILITY

Elizabeth E. Sparks, Ph.D.
The University of Calgary

Paper presented at the Fourth Annual Conference,
Society for the Advancement of Gifted Education,
September 23-24, 1993, Edmonton, AB.

The University of Calgary
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
702 Education Tower
Phone: (403) 220-5639
FAX: (403) 282-8479

EC 302 601

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
E. E. Sparks
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Abstract

The paper is a hermeneutic, or interpretive, inquiry that questions the historical-cultural roots of the assumption that knowing about giftedness begins by defining the concept of giftedness in terms of its essential properties that identify a select few children. This account speaks differently about a gifted way of life that is constituted by possibilities and is open to all persons. The paradigm for circular hermeneutic interpretation is the reading of a text, where the parts cannot be interpreted without an understanding of the whole, but the whole cannot be grasped without an understanding of the parts. This paper provides a concrete exemplar of interpretation in excerpts from a conversation with Heather, a 12-year-old student in Grade 7, who is reading a selection from the Grade 12 English 30 curriculum. Four possibilities for ontological giftedness that present themselves in the dialogue with text are discussed: imagination, confusion, ignorance, and fusion of horizons. The transformation into concrete actualities of the possibilities that present themselves in an actual reading of a text disclose Heather's becoming gifted.

A PARADIGM SHIFT FROM GIFTEDNESS-AS-POTENTIAL TO GIFTEDNESS-AS-POSSIBILITY

Swept along in the tumult of our busy day-to-day existence we fall into an unthinking acceptance of tradition as the way things *are*, a complacency that lulls us into believing that solutions have already been found and we can simply get on with things. As Heidegger (1962) sees it, "tradition takes what has come down to us and delivers it over to self-evidence...it blocks out access to these primordial 'sources'...it makes us forget that they have had such an origin, and makes us suppose that the necessity of going back to these sources is something which we need not even understand" (p. 43). In times of crisis, however, the traditional solutions can no longer be taken for granted. *Krisis*, from the Greek, means a decisive turning point or transformation. More so now than at any other time in our history we are encountering great ecological, political, economic, and social crises in our lives that portent a turn for better or for worse. In a recent Schumacher Lecture, Orr (1993) agrees that the list of crises is daunting but argues that what we face is "first and foremost a crisis of mind, perception, and values--hence, a challenge to those institutions presuming to shape minds, perceptions, and values. It is an educational challenge" (p. 16). What is needed is a way of opening to question the assumptions that lie hidden and are passed over unquestioned under the comfortable cloak of educational tradition.

Kelly (1989) writes of the continuing tendency within education to discuss issues at the level of shared assumptions. Assumptions reveal what is taken to be the *neutral* reality, the way things *are*. Educating fellow human beings, however, is never a value neutral activity. Teaching is guided by beliefs about the way things *ought-to-be*. Ought-to-be is a moral imperative, a self-conscious commitment to personally initiate events capable of realizing that end (Gadamer, 1989). Although we cannot choose *not* to have assumptions and to be influenced by them, we *can* choose not to be blindly guided by assumptions we have not consciously acknowledged or challenged.

Hermeneutics, or interpretive inquiry, takes up the challenge of evoking "new ways of seeing and thinking within a deep sense of tradition, bringing about new forms of engagement and dialogue about the world we face together" (Smith, 1991, p. 202). Hermeneutics has become the "common idiom of both philosophy and culture" at the end of the twentieth century (Vattimo, 1988, p. 399). The turn to hermeneutics can be read as a growing awareness of the importance of uncovering the "birth certificate" of cherished assumptions that guide our practical decisions.

Perhaps the oldest assumption in Western education is that giftedness is a valuable natural resource, potential that is the property of a few golden children, a commodity which can be exploited for the benefit of self and society. What is called for is a hermeneutic turn from education-as-gold-mine and giftedness-as-potential, to education-as-alchemy and giftedness-as-possibility. This paper argues for the kind of

education that provides opportunities to all students for a gifted way of life that is constituted by possibilities.

Defining Giftedness

A definition of giftedness is the traditional starting place for gifted education. Sillito and Wilde (1983) note that there are two major starting points for gifted education: definition to process, and definition through process. In the strategy of definition to process, psychologists and psychometricians labor to define giftedness in terms of its essential properties and to translate that concept into an operational definition that will yield instruments to measure those properties in children. Gifted children are frequently defined as those children identifiable by specialists as having superior general ability and/or creative aptitudes and talents (Marland, 1971). A high IQ score is a familiar example of operationalizing the potential of superior general ability. It is furthermore assumed that children who display this exceptional potential require special educational provisions. Definition to process can, therefore, lead to the formation of exclusive categories of gifted and not-gifted children as a means of justifying differentiated programs and other special education services for a recognizable group of special needs children.

With the strategy of definition through process, those students who successfully

move through the gifted program define gifted behaviors. Renzulli and associates' (1985) Triad/Revolving Door Model is an example of this approach. Renzulli defines gifted behaviors as the interaction of three psychological properties: above-average intelligence, creativity, and task commitment. This strategy encourages fostering gifted behaviors through an enrichment program rather than finding gifted children and designing differentiated programs to meet their needs.

Although the two strategies differ in their approaches, they are similar in assuming giftedness can be defined as an abstract concept and its essential psychological properties known. A psychological property, like real estate, is some "thing" one has or owns. This means that children can be sorted into gifted or not-gifted categories in terms of their inventories of individual potential. The talent pool of gifted resource is frequently regarded as a valuable national resource.

> The basic idea presented here is that the gifted individuals through their work can expand the total pool of resources available to us all with their creations and discoveries. If we can encourage more of such activity through special educational programs, then we will all have more resources available, even if they are not totally equally distributed. (Gallagher, 1990, p. 286)

The exploitation of gifted potential through special educational programming, therefore, is frequently argued on patriotic grounds. Gifted education is regarded as a sound national investment that puts us ahead of the competition in the international

marketplace.

Although the familiarity of the concept of giftedness-as-potential may suggest no need for further discussion, it is *because* giftedness-as-potential is *so* familiar that we need to talk further about it. Van Manen (1990) points out that "nothing is so silent as that which is taken-for-granted or self-evident" (p. 112). Becoming aware of the silence provides the conditions for listening both to what is said and what is not spoken about. In other words, what is at issue here is not a different definition of giftedness but a way of speaking differently about giftedness in deeply meaningful ways.

Like the opening of Pandora's box, prying into tradition is a risky business. It is not enough to simply become aware of assumptions. We must put our beliefs at risk. The risk of such questioning is, nevertheless, not without benefit and gifted education may be far from the only or even the prime beneficiary (Lupart, in Carlson, 1991). When the meaning of human giftedness is open to question rather than closed, Lupart notes that there is the exciting possibility that what emerges will be the catalyst for positive change throughout education. Gifted education has long been tormented by charges of elitism and privilege. We need to read that criticism for its truth. Failure to understand the cultural-historical legacy of gifted education leaves assumptions undisturbed and untested.

Giftedness-as-Potential

The origins of the concept of giftedness-as-potential can be traced to ancient Greece. Plato split reality into two realms of practice and theory. In *The Republic*, Plato (1952) describes two worlds. One is a shadowy cave-world, a realm of mere appearances and opinion in the ever changing flux of existence. Plato argues that one cannot know what is changing. Consequently, the practical *knowledge* of the baker, teacher, or physician is only ignorance parading as knowledge. All that belongs to the dynamic flux of lived experience Plato refers to in terms of darkness, turmoil, and deception which we must turn away from if we want to discover truth.

The other world is a meta-physical realm which abstracts the essence of the cave-world. Because this theoretical knowledge is an abstraction, it is no longer subject to the forces of change. According to Plato, the life-world can only be known through the application of theoretical knowledge. Plato insists that the truth about some thing is captured in the concept, not in the concrete case. Plato would say, for example, there is nothing *real* about a particular gifted child, rather what is real is the definition of giftedness. If a thing can be defined in terms of its essential properties that is all that needs to be known, or can be known, about that thing. The definition is the ultimate explanation of some thing. Plato further argues that the defining properties of the human self establish one's personal and societal worth. This concept resonates with the

gold mine metaphor of gifted education.

Education-as-Gold-Mine

In Plato's dialogue, the Republic (1952), he writes that the gods created humans in three types, the best made of gold, the second best made of silver, with the common crowd made of brass and iron. Education proceeds by testing the metal of children. The assay mark determines the education they receive, or do not receive, and the positions they will later fill within society. The golden few are prepared for the guardianship of the community and receive the best education; the silver children receive a lesser education suitable for soldiers; the base-metal children are educated as laborers. In the first place, Plato writes, no two persons are born exactly alike, but each child differs in natural endowments. He adds that because there is no telling where the light of talent or genius will break out, we must seek it impartially everywhere, in every rank and race and educate accordingly. In this way, Plato advocates universal education and every child, male and female, is given an education commensurate with potential for the benefit of self and society.

The Platonic notion that individuals can be defined in terms of essential properties and that education is intended to help individuals make the most of their inner resources resonates with contemporary gifted education. A defensible curriculum in

gifted education is assumed to differ in the same degree and dimension that the properties which define gifted children differ from not-gifted children. Furthermore, although the "underdevelopment" of individual potential is a concern throughout the regular education system, the theme of "riches left untapped" is frequently used to defend and promote gifted education. Caught up in the gold mine metaphor for gifted education, the purpose of education becomes the prospecting, mining, and development of children's hidden golden potential. The sinister reality of the gold mine metaphor, however, is the implication that only *some* students have the *right stuff* to be gifted.

Salmon (1985) writes that at its most profound, the meaning of human life is carried in metaphor. The stakes are high. Language is generative and metaphor brings a particular reality into being. Schon (1979) argues that "under the spell" of a metaphor, a particular landscape appears with prominent features that direct our attention one way rather than another. When education is framed as a gold mine, for instance, a technological ethic comes to the fore that emphasizes the prospecting and mining of gifted properties hidden within individual children. Something happens that is not controlled by those processing or being processed in the mine. Persons within the educational community are caught up in living the metaphor; the metaphor shapes the way life is lived.

Postman (1979) writes about the tendency to believe that God has provided us with metaphors that define our world and "from which we depart at the risk of losing our

immortal souls" (p. 245). It is not God who provides us with the metaphor of the golden gifted potential--it is Plato. It is, nevertheless, difficult to overestimate the influence of the Platonic tradition on contemporary education. Whitehead (in Russell, 1961) asserts that "the safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato" (p. 122). Likewise, our doctrines of Western education can be traced to Plato. The danger here, Russell (1961) points out, is that we have praised Plato but not understood him. It is the way that Platonic tradition is brought into play that shapes the horizons of our world. Gadamer (1989) notes that we can speak about the "narrowness of horizon, of the possible expansion, of the opening up of new horizons" (p. 302) in shaping the meaning of human life. What happens if the familiar concept of giftedness-as-potential and the gold mine metaphor is one way but not the only way of understanding giftedness? Is it possible to understand giftedness in ways that do not lose touch with the concrete particularities of being in the world?

Giftedness-as-Possibility

The dual Platonic realms of practice and theory distinguish between *that* things exist and *what* things are: the difference between *existentia*, the ontological existence of things; and *essentia*, the ontical essence of things. Heidegger (1962) observes that following in Plato's footsteps, we presume existence and take it for granted that when

we want to know about giftedness we ask the ontic question, "What is it?" The answer to this question leads to an emphasis on essential defining properties--what a thing has. Essence is what makes it possible to name a "thing" a dog or a cat. *Essentia* holds that "every single thing has an essence, an inherent nature or principle (such as spirit of wine), which necessarily causes it to be what it is, and thus to act as it does" (Popper, 1985, p. 165). Identifying the essence of a "thing," is to abstract what is common to all those "things" in the form of a concept.

That giftedness exists, rather than nothing, pushes us back into the wholeness of lived experience. The ontological question asks, *Is* giftedness? The answer is not a concept, a definition whose properties can be listed and to which new instances can be compared. *Existentia* is the dynamic coming into being of something and the wonder of the future possibilities that living in the world presents. Ontologically, giftedness is a possibility, not-yet-finished and not-yet-ready-for-definition. What this means is that giftedness is not constituted by the properties of an elite few but by the possibilities that living in the world presents to all of us. Possibilities present themselves in the world and require a reaching beyond the individual, rather than a turning inward to mine potential.

Smith (1989) notes: "We find ourselves in our gifts, in the discovery of what is given to us, only to the degree we are prepared to lose ourselves to what we have found ourselves to be" (p. 33). In understanding something we can only begin with ourselves but in coming to understand something differently, we change. This means that in a

new understanding of something we lose who we are but in that new unity of meaning we find ourselves in who we are becoming. In that transformation we are *more* ourselves. That there is *more* to giftedness than an abstract stable concept, reveals the ontological difference of giftedness. Jardine (1990) observes that "we stand, in education, at the moment of the generativity of the human race and education is, most essentially, our response to this moment" (p. 216). Education is fundamentally involved with the person in the making, not with one already made. It is therefore with *becoming* gifted rather than with *being* gifted that genuine education is fundamentally involved.

The ontological realm of existence provides living room, an open space which presents possible ways of being. It is interesting to note that "present" also means "gift." Today is the present, a gift. The gift of life is a gift given to all persons. One does not earn or deserve one's life. Rather, the gift of life is freely given and freely accepted. A gift, however, is only a possibility for those who see its possibilities. Each of us can look forward with anticipation to the possibilities of living in the world and becoming gifted by making those possibilities our own actualities. Ontologically, giftedness is a permanent positive human possibility, a way of dwelling in possibilities and becoming more who we are.

Education-as-Alchemy

The gold mine metaphor for gifted education with its focus on giftedness-as-potential misses the point of education. What the gold mine metaphor misses is the alchemical creation of the gold in the first place. Jung (1967) underscores that the earliest Greek texts show that alchemy does not refer to a collection of futile chemical recipes for changing lead into gold but to personal transformation, a philosophy of life that uses a chemical metaphor to talk about becoming gifted. In alchemy, *we* ourselves are the common matter which is transformed and gold is a symbol for excellence, wisdom, light, and perfection. In other words, rather than the Platonic "testing the metal" of children to identify the golden few with the potential for extraordinariness, alchemy proclaims all humans have the life-soul to transform the possibilities of one's mundane existence into the gold of personal excellence. Alchemy is the constant groping and striving for personal excellence that *is* life lived to the fullest. Alchemy is, therefore, a metaphor for the adventure of gifted living, which at its best is the quest for a gifted way of life. This ontological transformation of life's possibilities into one's own actualities is metaphorized in the hermeneutic circle.

Hermeneutics regards all understanding as circular. The circle is an ancient human symbol for the wholeness of human understanding (Jung, 1967). This holistic event of understanding means that we already understand what is to be interpreted. We

do not move into totally alien territory in understanding something new but frame the not-yet-known against a backdrop of the already-known. In other words, interpretation always takes place within a horizon that is projected by one's history and culture. The paradigm for the hermeneutic circle, Hoy (1993) observes, "is the reading of a text, where the parts cannot be interpreted without an understanding of the whole, but the whole cannot be grasped without an understanding of the parts" (p. 172). Gadamer (1989) describes reading as a dialogue that involves "making the text speak" (p. 377) in bringing new meaning to our lives.

What follows is a paradigm case of hermeneutics, a concrete exemplar of the transformation into concrete actualities of the possibilities that present themselves in an actual reading of a text. It features short excerpts from a conversation with Heather, a 12-year-old student in Grade 7, who is reading from James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues," a selection from the Grade 12 English 30 curriculum (Sparks, 1993). The four-sentence opening paragraph on which Heather's dialogical reading relationship is based is printed below.

> I read about it in the paper, in the subway, on my way to work. I read it, and I couldn't believe it, and I read it again. Then perhaps I just stared at it, at the newsprint spelling out his name, spelling out the story. I stared at it in the swinging lights of the subway car, and in the faces and bodies of the people, and in my own face, trapped in the darkness which roared outside.

Figure 1 (Sparks, 1993) is offered as an aid to understanding the hermeneutic adventure of dwelling in possibilities and the constant striving to go beyond oneself in anticipation of future growth by being and becoming more who we are.

Place Figure 1 about here

The circular figure, whose shape was suggested by Escher's (1967) woodcuts, is not the familiar ideal geometric form. Indeed, throughout its venerable history circles suggest plastic life-forms of flowers, snakes, and dragons rather than perfect spheres. Jung (1967) further points out that most mandalas, the Tibetan name for sacred circles, are not round but take the form of a flower, cross, or wheel and show a distinct tendency towards a quaternary structure. Figure 1 also appears to have four surfaces, or horizons. Those four horizons of ontological giftedness that present themselves in the circular hermeneutic event of understanding are: imagination, confusion, ignorance, and fusion of horizons. If we imagine the figure to be a pathway that can be entered at any point and the surface followed around the figure, four complete rounds are required to return to the point of departure. Thus, the figure is not four separate surfaces but one continuous path which leads the traveller around the figure four times. The circular movement is not closed, not a vicious circle, but opens the traveller to living in the world and to the possibilities for giftedness that life presents.

Imagination

Imagination is a playing with possibilities. Through the gift of imagination it is possible to make present what is not-yet-present. In the following excerpt, Heather observes that at the beginning of the story by imagining what will happen in a story her curiosity is aroused and she is lured into the reading relationship.

> Keep you interested in the story because, you know, curiosity, human curiosity to see what is gonna happen, to see who this person is. And you just kinda purposely just keep going along this way until, like, a good part where he can start introducing people and still hoping that the reader's *hooked* on the story. And it's just kind of a way of *luring* the reader in and keeping them attracted to the story.

Imagination presents the possibility for students to test in some concrete way how their predictions of the world actually work their way out in reality.

Imagination is not an activity that takes place in a void. Whether reading print or reading the world, we always imagine what is possible, probable, and practical from the standpoint of prior experience and background knowledge. We move from the familiar to the strange, from the known to the new. The creative spirit imagines the possibility of something new and attempts to transform the old by going beyond what is, to what is not-yet. Imagination is also intentional, directed toward a particular topic. This requires

Heather to become aware of who she is, and to anticipate the way in which what she knows, believes, and feels about a particular topic influences who she is becoming. Imagination reveals that giftedness-as-possibility presents itself to everyone to constantly strive to live beyond oneself in making life's possibilities one's actualities.

The possibility of giftedness exists for all readers, not just a select few, through the gift of imagination. Imagination, nevertheless, is only a gift for those who recognize its possibilities and there are factors working against this. There is something mysterious about imagination, the arts of augury, foretelling the future, anticipating what is not-yet, and predicting what will happen next. Our present age, by way of contrast, privileges scientific and technical know-how, Orr (1993) observes that is assumed that those things which can be weighed, measured, and counted are more true than those which cannot be quantified. Because imagination reaches across the boundary of the familiar to the exotic and esoteric, the understanding it brings is not characterized by the precision and objectivity that defines what is taken to be knowledge. There is a danger, therefore, that imagination will be viewed as a meaningless activity. Orr further observes that in cases where imagination is supported, in our technological age our imagination is increasingly confined to technological possibilities: "Our needs are those of the spirit," Orr argues, "yet our imagination and creativity are overwhelmingly aimed at *things*" (p. 18). He argues that we must question the assumption that our future is one of constantly evolving technology and that this is a good thing. Citing Orwell, Orr

cautions that the "logical end" of technological progress "is to reduce the human being to something resembling a brain in a bottle" (p. 18).

Confusion

The reading relationship also reveals possibilities for giftedness through the gift of confusion. In the following excerpt, Heather is aware of the multivocity of the text and understands the other voices not as a problem to solve but as positive possibilities for dialogue.

> Well it was confusing. It was um (looking at passage), there were no real specifics in this paragraph. There was nothing...um to start, like, there were no real characters, no names of characters that you could start getting a feel for. All you knew was that there was this man, well, you had a pretty good, well it was probably a man but you wouldn't know.

There are many possible turns that the story might take but there is no place for her to stand outside the confusion to sort things out. Heather is aware of the need to expect the unexpected in the reading and she is not threatened by the confusion. It beckons to her and she explores its strangeness through various metaphors.

> Well you can't understand it. You can't really...you don't know who the characters are. You don't know what's really happening. You feel kind of *behind*

a wall and you can't really see anything. It's like hearing things but not seeing them. You don't know what's happening. It's kinda like when you *listen to a radio show*, or something, and you never know who's saying what, and what's happening, and what's going on. You just kind of hear what's -hear the dialogue and hear what's kind of happening. You never really get the whole picture of it. And, it's- that's kinda the feeling of confusion, when you are kinda *behind a screen door* and you can't see everything clearly, everything is like in a blur.

The story comes alive for Heather, the story "jumps in" and Heather finds herself catapulted into the middle of an ongoing conversation with a stranger.

I think maybe the spelling out of his name. They could say whose name it was because that..in a story like this where it jumps in, it doesn't really start with an introduction. You kinda know that they're gonna tell you who the car- the main character's name is, or it just remain, remains...anonymous. But they could say *who* was his name.

In this opening paragraph where even the gender of the protagonist is a mystery, Heather wants to begin to explore the distance between herself and the text by first knowing the name of her dialogue partner--she would like an introduction, or perhaps an opportunity to introduce herself. This is Heather's acknowledgment of the "other" in a reading relationship--the hermeneutic salute to something new on the horizon.

Possibilities for giftedness are lost if readers ignore, reject, or abandon what is

enigmatic in their reading. The gift of confusion is left unopened if readers mistake being confused with being a poor student. Opportunities are missed if readers view confusions in text as a technical problem to fix, rather than an invitation to risk opening oneself to an encounter with that which is new at the boundary of the not-yet-known in life.

Ignorance

The beginning of wisdom is the gift of ignorance, knowing one does not know. Heather is aware of the text as the "other" and she is open to exploring the distance that separates them, searching for an opening to the possibilities that an encounter with the unknown presents. Conversation is an art. The back and forth of question and answer is a dialogical activity that requires keen attentiveness to the particularities of a concrete, individual case. Heather is aware that the text makes demands on her. Finding a gap or opening is not arbitrary but takes into consideration the purpose of questioning. Heather is also aware of the paradox that one must already know the answer in order to ask the appropriate question. A particular question opens a particular text and opens the interpreter to the possibilities of such an encounter.

Heather states, "It's harder to make up a question than an answer." She continues.

> Well because, if you are going to make up a question you have to think about the question and what the answer could be too. You have to think of *both* things. Not just, "Oh the answer to this is blah, blah, blah." But you have to find something tha'd be *good* material to question about and of the answer, what types of answers there could be for it. So you have to consider all those.

Gadamer (1989) underscores that "to conduct a conversation means to allow oneself to be conducted by the subject matter to which the partners in the dialogue are oriented" (p. 367).

Possibilities for giftedness are lost if readers regard questioning as a technique. Reducing the art of questioning to a technique has the effect of generalizing about a question classification without considering the particular question-answer relationship. It is frequently claimed, for example, that gifted children must be asked higher level questions. To ask so-called critical or inferential questions, therefore, without considering the situatedness of the reading situation destroys the necessary conditions for the dialogical reading relationship.

Fusion of horizons

The dialogue moves back and forth with Heather arguing points, weighing the evidence, dropping pre-judgments, and taking a stand.

> Now when I think back I think that...um, the darkness, trapped in the darkness, means that something bad happened...and that he feels trapped and that he can't do anything and that he can't help whoever this person is. And that um...he feels boxed in and there's nothing he can do. He feels helpless. The whole reason of his helplessness, the whole cause of his helplessness is probably that story in the paper. And so, I was kinda wrong in saying that it had nothing really to do with it. But it really had a lot to do with it, the emotional aspect of the paragraph.

In this way, Heather brings the last errant notes into harmony. In the reading relationship, meaning does not belong to the author, the historical topic, or the reader, but emerges in a fusion of the horizons of all three. Reaching a fusion of horizons of reader-text-topic in a carefully conducted dialogue is the purpose of the hermeneutic event.

Gadamer (1989) uses the term "incarnation" in talking about what he calls the "miracle of language" (p. 420) in which texts are made living human flesh. The event of incarnation makes intense and particular demands on the reading relationship. The reader, text, and topic share an ontological relationship that dissolves the distance between them in the same living story. In this way, a reader keeps knowledge alive by incarnating the life-work of others.

The possibilities of giftedness are lost if readers reduce reading to a method. Method, from the Greek, *methodos*, means "following a way." Madison (1990) points

out that method

> dispenses with personal, subjective *judgment* (this indeed is one of its *raisons d'etre*). One has only to learn the method itself, in and for itself; it is an intellectual technique (like the "scientific method"). Having done so, one has only to apply it to whatever subject matter one chooses; the only criterion in applying the method is *correctness* of application (not *appropriateness* in choosing to apply it in the first place); one's guide is the method itself, not the subject matter (such as human beings) to which it is applied. (p. 28)

Method assumes that the possible world of text is a "universe of death" (Oliver, 1981). This strong phrase, Oliver notes, recalls the belief that the ultimate reality of the universe is "hard and unyielding lumps" of "dead matter" (p. 39) on which the application of method reveals the laws by which it works. By reducing the human relationship of reading to method, the text-world becomes a disenchanted world, a realm of inert knowledge. Inert knowledge is a long-standing educational issue. According to Whitehead (1970), traditional education is in the business of dead knowledge. This dead knowledge, says Whitehead, produces a "mental dryrot" that kills the ferment of genius. When we talk about knowledge, says Whitehead, we are talking about human minds and not dead matter.

Whereas the point of method is *not* having to think about the particularities of the situation, Madison points out that practical reasoning requires responsible judgment that

takes into consideration the particularities of the situation. Judgment demands that decisions *never* simply be reduced to a matter of applying a method that automatically and unequivocally tells us exactly what to do. In reading

> horizons are challenged in ways too hit-or-miss to be called methodical--when events do not answer to our anticipations, when actions based on an interpretation of events prove inadequate, when we are open to dialogue. Method knows how to proceed, what to do to assure that its conclusions can be replicated; dialogue must find what to say and what to ask in the midst of the dialogue itself, which cannot be replicated. (Crusius, 1991, p. 38)

Reading is an art, rather than a method. There is always *genius* in creating a work of art. To understand reading ontologically, we must work with that genius toward *congenial* understanding of aesthetic experience. The ancient Greeks referred to hermeneutic interpretation as practical philosophy or *phronesis*,

> a kind of genius for practical life, but less a gift than the constant task of "renewed adaptation to new situations," a work of adapting general principles to reality, through which justice is realized, a "tactfulness in practical truth," a "rightness of judgment, that stems from correctness of soul." (Gadamer, 1989, p. 88)

In summary, the reading relationship that Heather cultivates in her striving to understand a single paragraph, reveals positive possibilities for giftedness. Reading is a human relationship rather than a technical one. In an ordinary, everyday event of

reading, something extraordinary happens. Heather responds with passion and prudence to the gifts which the encounter presents. Heather expands her horizons, listening and allowing her opinions to develop in a dialogical reading with text partners whose horizons differ from her own. In the course of understanding the meaning of this single paragraph, Heather understands herself differently, understands the text differently, and understands the topic differently. This ontological change is the transformation of possibilities into actualities--becoming gifted.

Homecoming

This paper has opened a space for voices that speak differently about the meaning of human giftedness. It is not enough to trace the presumption of the existential realm to Plato. It is not enough to explain the crisis of giftedness by pointing to the dominance of the conceptual language of giftedness-as-potential. The crisis of giftedness that is disclosed in this paper is ontological. That means we are living the crisis. It is our inheritance. Our inheritance is not our past but also projects the horizon within which we live today and imagine tomorrow. What is required is the interpretation of our inheritance as a range of possibilities which are made accessible and which can be realized or passed over in the working out of our practical affairs. In this regard, hermeneutic inquiry takes a different path from that of traditional research. The practice

of hermeneutics is a homecoming to the world of lived experience.

In resisting attempts to rise to the abstract conceptual knowledge of essential properties in a definition of giftedness, hermeneutics seeks an ontological understanding of a gifted way of living in the world. Giftedness-as-possibility is not a concept about which to theorize but a practical adventure that takes us past traditional boundaries. Feldman (1977) cautions that to continue in the traditional mode in gifted education hinders "progress toward deeper understanding and appreciation of those who are gifted as well as those who are not" (p. 581). Dettmer (1988) states that "our neatly stacked concepts and practices in education for gifted and talented students threaten to obscure interesting doorways of opportunity for excellence in education and appropriate programs for all students (p. 33). Lupart and Andrews (1993) urge a re-focus in education on programs that challenge all students to excel in subject areas that excite them.

Language arts is a subject area for gifted education. Edwards (1982) observes, however, that in the language arts, researchers have been "running from alchemy." The intent is to replace the alchemist with the chemist, to make language arts research as "hard" and methodical as that of the natural sciences. Moffett (1991) regards this as a serious problem. He charges that researchers are intimidated by a climate of "scientific inquisition" in which the establishment disparages attempts to explore the esoteric in life and punishes those who deal with "taboo subjects," particularly the language of alchemy

that speaks for what resists method in education.

What is striking about this argument, is the observation that the language of reading resounds with the esoteric in life and echoes the transformative language of alchemy. Something *happens* to a child through reading. These *haps* are not the exclusive property of a few elite students but are gifts presented to everyone in the reading dialogue. A child already knows that something magic happens in learning to read. Researchers already know that reading is a miracle that sweeps up a child in a communion of meaning with others. Teachers already know that falling in love with a book is the soul of reading that cannot be defined as a component part of a rationale model of reading or pinned down by an objective marking scheme. Parents already know that reading transforms a child, but in losing who the child is, they find the child in who the child is becoming. Taking one's place in a community of readers means entering into the living communal dialogue. The common ground of genuine dialogue *announces* human equality. In this way, dialogue moves giftedness out of elitism and into pluralism that discloses diverse and multiple ways of becoming gifted. Each student's personal best response to what comes to greet him or him in life is uniquely valuable. Responding boldly when a golden opportunity knocks and striving to make the most of life, discloses the circular hermeneutic adventure of becoming gifted that exists as a permanent positive *human* possibility.

Notes

I gratefully acknowledge the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Doctoral Fellowship Award 453-88-0311.

References

Carlson, J. (1991, Summer). Finding hidden talents. *Calgary Alumni Magazine, 22*, 13-14.

Crusius, T.W. (1991). *A teacher's introduction to philosophical hermeneutics*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Dettmer, P. (1988). Mandated gifted programs--Panacean or problematic? *Journal for the Education of the Gifted, 12*, 14-28.

Edwards, B.L. (1982). *Rhetoric, alchemy and heuristic procedures: Some epistemological questions*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, March, 1982, San Francisco.

Escher, M.C. (1967). *The graphic work of M.C. Escher*. (J.E. Brigham, Trans.). New York: Ballantine Books.

Feldman, D. (1977). Review of the intellectually gifted: An overview. *Harvard Educational Review, 47*, 576-581.

Gadamer, H.G. (1989). *Truth and method* (2nd rev. ed.). (J. Weinsheimer & D.G. Marshall, Trans.). New York.

Gallagher, J.J. (1990). Notes from the editor's desk. *Journal for the education of the gifted, 13*, 285-287.

Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time*. (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). New York: Harper & Row.

Jardine, D.W. (1990). Awakening from Descartes' nightmare: On the love of ambiguity in phenomenological approaches to education. *Studies in Philosophy and Education, 10*, 211-232.

Jung, C.G. (1967). *Alchemical studies* (R.F.C. Hall, Trans.). New York: Princeton University Press.

Kelly, A.V. (1986). *Knowledge and curriculum planning*. London: Harper & Row.

Lupart, J.L., & Andrews, J.W. (1993). *The Canadian classroom: An inclusive mosaic*. Toronto: Nelson Canada.

Marland, S., Jr. (1971). *Education of the Gifted and Talented, Vol. 1*. Report to the Congress of the United States by the U.S. Commissioner of Education. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Moffett, J. (1991). Current issues and future directions. In J. Flood, J.M. Jensen, D.Lapp, & J.R. Squire (Eds.), *Handbook of research on teaching the English language arts* (pp. 827-838). New York: Macmillan.

Orr, D. (1993, September-October). Schools for the twenty-first century. *Resurgence, 160*, 16-19.

Plato. (1952). The Republic (B. Jowett, Trans.). In R.M. Hutchins (Ed.), *Great books of the Western World: Vol. 7. Plato* (pp. 295-441). Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica.

Popper, K.R. (1985). The aim of science. In D. Miller (Ed.), *Popper selections* (pp. 162-170). Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Renzulli, J.S., & Reis, S.M. (1985). *The schoolwide enrichment model: A comprehensive plan for educational excellence. Mansfield Center, CT: Creative Learning Press.*

Russell, B. (1961). *History of western philosophy.* London: George Allen & Unwin.

Salmon, P. (1985). *Living in time.* Toronto: Dent.

Schon, D.A. (1979). Generative metaphor: A perspective on problem-setting in social policy. In A. Ortony (Ed.), *Metaphor and thought* (pp. 254-283). Cambridge: University of Cambridge.

Sillito, M.T., & Wilde, W.D. (1983). *Educating the gifted.* Edmonton: Alberta Education.

Smith, D.G. (1989). What is given in giftedness? *Journal of Learning about Learning, 1*, 31-35.

Smith, D.G. (1991). Hermeneutic inquiry: The hermeneutic imagination and the pedagogic text. In E.C. Short (Ed.), *Focus of curriculum inquiry* (pp. 187-209). New York: Suny.

Sparks, E.E. (1993). *A hermeneutic turn to giftedness-as-possibility.* Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation. The University of Calgary.

Toulmin, S.E. (1968). *The place of reason in ethics.* Cambridge: University Press.

Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience.* London, ON: Althouse.

Vattimo, G. (1988). Hermeneutics as Koine. *Theory, Culture & Society, 5*, 399-408.

Whitehead, A.N. (1970). Process and reality. In H. Ozman (Ed.), *Contemporary critics of education* (pp. 211-223). New Danville, IL: Interstate.

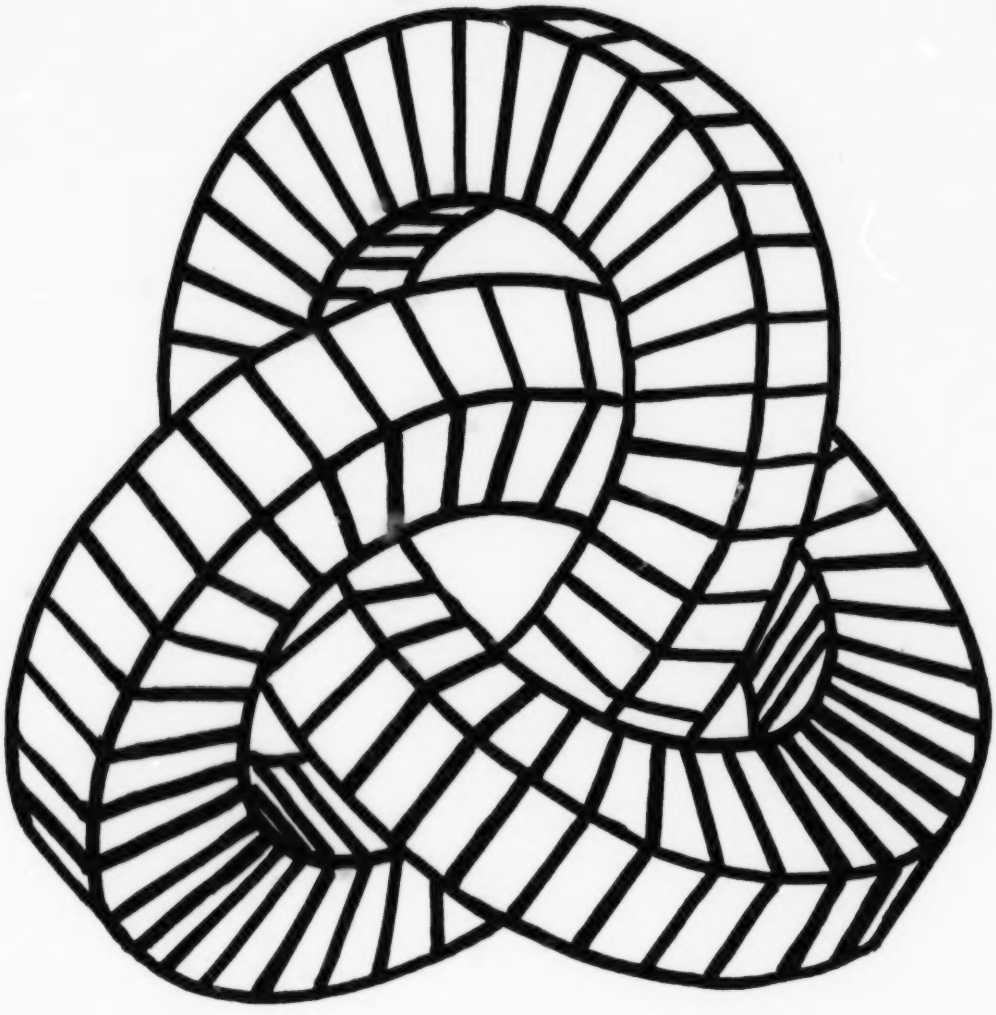

Figure 1. The circular path of hermeneutic understanding.
The figure is not four separate surfaces but one continuous path which leads the interpreter around the figure four times. The apparent four surfaces with their different horizons are intended to recall four interconnected aspects that are always present in an event of understanding: (a) imagination, (b) confusion, (c) ignorance, and (d) fusion of horizons. (Sparks, 1993. Suggested by Escher, 1967, Plate 39.)